



A B-29 Superfortress unloads fire bombs on Yokohama, Japan, May 1945. The Superfortress was part of the Twentieth Air Force in its earliest years. The Twentieth was born April 4, 1944, as a means to take the devastation of World War II directly to the mainland of Japan.

Courtesy photos, U.S. Air Force

# Twentieth Air Force to celebrate 62nd birthday

Master Sgt. William Medema  
*Twentieth Air Force Historian*

As events in the world change the way we look at defense, Twentieth Air Force has remained a steady force, providing top cover for those serving around the world. The mission of the missile wings, maintaining a robust strategic deterrent, still represent stability through uncertain times.

That tradition began during another time of uncertainty, when battles raged over the islands of the Pacific and on the Asian continent. Twentieth Air Force was born in that crucible as a means to take the devastation of World War II directly to the mainland of Japan.

Conceived of by then Commanding General of the Army Air Force Henry Arnold, Twentieth Air Force was activated as the first long-range, heavy bomber force dedicated to conduct truly strategic operations to defeat the enemy. To accomplish that mission, the War Department activated Twentieth Air Force on April 4, 1944, equipped with the most advanced bomber of the time, the B-29 Superfortress. To maintain the new bomber force's independence, General Arnold, at that time promoted to four-star rank, assumed command of Twentieth Air Force.

Early in its operations, Twen-

tieth Air Force began hitting the Japanese directly from bases in China, in missions code named Matterhorn. Later, as United States amphibious forces advanced through Japan's island fortresses, the B-29s attacked the Japanese home islands from bases in those captured islands. As the war neared its end and the invasion of Japan loomed, General Arnold relinquished command to Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay. Under General Arnold's command, Twentieth Air Force struck at the very heart of Japan. Later under General LeMay, strategic bombing against the Japanese homeland became more intense. To bring the war to an end and prevent the anticipated devastation of an outright invasion of Japan, B-29s of the 509th Composite Group under Twentieth Air Force dropped the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After the war, Twentieth Air Force stood guard over the occupied islands of Japan through the Korean conflict. As the Air Force drew down its numbered air forces, Twentieth Air Force inactivated at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, on March 1, 1955. The unit remained inactive for over 35 years. With major reorganizations in the early 1990s, Twentieth Air Force was reactivated at Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif., with a new strate-

gic mission. On Sept. 1, 1991, under Strategic Air Command and later Air Combat Command, Twentieth Air Force took charge of all intercontinental ballistic missile forces. That mission included command of six strategic missile wings. On July 1, 1993, Twentieth Air Force came under Air Force Space Command, and three months later the ICBM headquarters moved to Warren. During these organizational changes the missile fleet continued to reduce its forces in response to strategic treaty obligations and the end of the Cold War requirement for a massive retaliatory nuclear strike capability.

During the 1990s, the Air Force downsized units under Twentieth Air Force from six wings to three, the 90th Space Wing, the 91st Space Wing at Minot AFB, N.D., and the 341st Space Wing at Malmstrom AFB, Mont. At the same time, the number of missiles controlled by Twentieth Air Force was reduced from 1,000 alert ICBMs to 550. In response to new arms agreements, the missile force reduced further to 500 with the deactivation of the country's Peacekeeper missiles at Warren in September 2005. While force reduction continued, Twentieth Air Force moved ahead with sustainment programs to ensure the nuclear deterrent remained

viable into the year 2020. While the ICBM fleet adjusts to a deterrent capability made up of one missile system after the deactivation of the Peacekeeper missile, they move forward in the 21st century, maintaining a viable deterrent with the modernization of the Minuteman III.

The men and women of Twentieth Air Force continue to perform their strategic mission, following a tradition born over 60 years earlier. In an increasingly uncertain world, the ICBM force faces many challenges ahead. Just as they played the key role in ending war with Japan, Twentieth Air Force represents the most formidable and responsive force for deterrence in the world today. Instead of flying over the crests of the western Pacific, they serve over the waves of grass on the western plains, standing guard as an integral part of our nation's strategic nuclear defense. From bombers to ICBMs and from strategic bombing to strategic deterrence, the women and men of Twentieth Air Force continue a tradition born 60 years ago.

Those proud professionals who carry on that mission, through their perseverance, still characterize the devotion to duty displayed over the skies of China, Burma and the home islands of Japan.



Far above: A UH-1N helicopter escorts a convoy to the missile field. The Twentieth Air Force mission has changed from fighting the Japanese during World War II to, most recently, deterrence with intercontinental ballistic missiles. Twentieth Air Force celebrates its 62nd birthday April 4.

Above: Members of the 90th Maintenance Group prepare a Peacekeeper intercontinental ballistic missile for transport in August 2002. The Peacekeeper, considered to be the most powerful and accurate missile in the world, was deactivated in 2005.

Left: Members of the 90th Security Forces Group participate in an exercise here recently. Security forces members are vital to the Twentieth Air Force mission. They protect the missile field 24 hours a day.

